

September 1989

Today is the greatest - I

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September 1989 by pineapplecrushface

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Summary:

In the weeks between killing It and the beginning of school, Richie and Eddie sort it out.

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It wasn't even the weirdest thing that happened to him that week, was the thing. The fourth-weirdest, maybe. Number one: killing the clown. Next was the floating dead kids – no, that was number one, especially when the spell that had kept them floating was broken and they began to come down. Definitely number one. Three was watching Henry Bowers of all people go sailing past them on his way to the bottom of wherever the fuck the well ended up. Was he dead? Who even knew. Richie would bet against it. Patrick Hockstetter aside, bullies just didn't die. Like video game bosses, they just put on another outfit and ran to a different castle.

So yeah, being kissed by Eddie Kaspbrak was a distant fourth on his long list of weird shit. On the list of things Richie Tozier liked very much, however, it was at the top. And who would have thought the old boy had it in him? It was nice to know Eddie was capable of surprising the shit out of someone now and again.

“Can I wash my hands at your house? I can't go back to my house all bloody. My mother's still threatening to move in with my great-aunt Edna after the shit I pulled last week,” Eddie said when he and Richie picked up their bikes and walked them out of the Barrens.

“What, you don't like our bodily fluids mingling?” Richie asked, but nicely – Eddie had hardly made a peep about the fluid thing, although the entire group had paused, waiting for him to go into hysterics, when Richie grabbed his hand.

“The longer you go without cleaning it, the more likely you are to get an infection. I'm not losing a fucking arm because of you,” Eddie snapped.

And because he was feeling pretty good, all things considered – all things being the fact that his palms had jagged cuts on them and Bev was moving away and school was about to start again – he did not give voice to any of the replies that bubbled up in response, and just led Eddie to his house. It was middle-of-the-workday empty, with dust motes floating lazily in the sunlight from the open front curtains. Richie hated the empty house in the summer. He associated that

afternoon silence and the shade with a kind of desperate boredom and isolation that had marked much of his childhood. But with Eddie there it was kind of nice. They went straight to the downstairs bathroom where the medicine was stored. This was not Richie's first time at the Eddie Kaspbrak Antiseptic Rodeo.

He opened the cabinet and let Eddie pull out what he wanted, watching him pick up various items, shake his head over the ingredients, and put them back. Sometimes, he thought, Eddie made him want to tug on his hair, sort of hard. Just – it was cute, that was all. Fucking dumb and cute the way he pursed his lips like an old lady. He drove his finger into Eddie's side to tickle him, which satisfied him a little.

"Cut it out," Eddie said absently. "Don't you have any cotton balls?"

"Under the sink," he said.

Eddie began the complicated process of washing his hands without getting his cast wet, and after a second Richie batted him away and took over.

"You're slow as shit," he said. "I want to get out of this bathroom before I die of old age."

Eddie submitted to the washing with only one criticism – "Between the fingers too" – and Richie patted his hands dry and picked up the peroxide.

"I can do that," Eddie said.

"I already said you're slow as shit." Richie pulled his hands close, palms up, and dabbed the cuts with the wet cotton, blowing on them when he was done.

"Now you're getting germs all over them again," Eddie murmured, but didn't stop him. The cuts on his palms, which had seemed deep when Richie was rinsing the dried blood away, were nothing more than thin scratches, really. He looked at his own hands: fresh wounds, but more like paper cuts than glass.

He opened his mouth to inform Eddie of the latest development in

their ongoing sci-fi nightmare, but he only got out “Ed–” before Eddie stretched up and kissed him on the mouth, firmly like he knew he was going to have to shut Richie up first.

“What the fuck?” he asked, before he realized Eddie might take it the wrong way – a bad what the fuck instead of a good one.

Eddie licked his lips and flicked his eyes up and then down again before looking like he was gathering up all his courage – girding his loins, so to speak, Richie thought, which sent him on a mental tangent of loins, Africa, gazelles being chased by loins, caged loins, why didn’t you ever see gazelles at the zoo? Were they endangered because they were stupid? – before Eddie took a breath and said, “Thank you for washing my hands and not being a jerk.”

Richie stared at him for a second and then, because he wanted to do it, he bent his head and kissed Eddie back. With tongue.

“Richie, Jesus,” Eddie said, pushing him away.

“No? You don’t want some of this?” he said, sticking his tongue out.

“No, just–” Eddie tilted up again and pressed his lips against Richie’s, and Richie got it.

“I got it,” he said, delighted.

“Then shut up, okay?” Eddie said, tugging him down.

Richie shut up. Part of it was that Eddie said it gently like he was asking him to be quiet and pay attention for a second. Part of it was that – and really, this was hardly an exaggeration – he had never experienced anything this awesome. He assumed that the day his parents finally gave into his begging and bought him a Sega Genesis would probably surpass it, but right here and now, this was the fucking most.

He put his hands on Eddie’s sides to pull him closer and got distracted by the slightly rough sensation of the polo material against his now-painless, sweaty palms, and then Eddie gasped at the touch and then – amazingly – then there was tongue after all, and Eddie didn’t push him away this time. Eddie, as a matter of fact, was tilting

his head and kissing even more enthusiastically and messily than Richie was. His skin tingled all over and it felt vaguely the way sticking a wet finger into a light socket felt, except without the charge of dull pain that came with it. Who the fuck cared about *anything* but this? How was he supposed to ever care about anything again?

Eddie's fingers dug into his hip, squeezing hard once, twice, before he pulled away.

"Hey," Richie said, trying to follow. He felt cold, like he'd been swimming in warm water and was forced to get out.

"I have to go," Eddie said, shaking his head and staring at the floor. He was flushed and messed up – *because I kissed him*, Richie thought gleefully even as the whistle appeared in Eddie's breath. He hated that noise. And he realized, suddenly, that Eddie was starting to do the kind of hyperventilation crying that Richie had only ever seen him do when something really bad was happening and he couldn't breathe enough to express how upset he was. Like clown bad. Henry Bowers bad.

Richie was surprised enough that he let Eddie push past him and run out of the house without a word, although he recovered after a second and ran after him, stopping at the door and bellowing, "What the fuck?" into the empty street.

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By the evening he had replayed the entire experience in his head so many times that it had lost its reality. What had the kissing really been like? He kept getting small sensory flashbacks that made him feel like his stomach was dropping into his knees because *he had kissed Eddie* and Eddie, for fifteen minutes anyway, had really, really fucking liked kissing him. He'd never have imagined it. Not that he hadn't wanted to kiss Eddie – he'd been thinking about it in a way that was somehow both furtive and sweet, like he was afraid to think about it too long because it was so nice he could hardly bear it, for at least two weeks. Not before that, really, although Eddie was always a different color in his mind than his other friends. They were all sort of a nice hazy blue, and Eddie was bright yellow. There was nothing

as fun as hanging out with his friends, but when Eddie couldn't make it there was always a naggy disappointment. Naggy like Eddie himself, he thought with a sigh. He supposed it was a crush, which seemed so stupid because it was Eddie, who had once explained to him in excruciating detail how your poop was supposed to look if you had healthy bowel movements. And those were the words he used: bowel movements. Did other people have these problems? Probably not. This was kind of a Richie Tozier special.

Something had changed after Neibolt Street. Not between him and Bev, or him and Ben, or Mike, or Stan. But Bill, yes, of course things had changed with Bill, and things had especially changed with Eddie. He had sat in the Barrens alone the rest of that afternoon, after the fight. Stan hovered over him until he finally snapped and said that unless Stan wanted the tip of his dick chopped off before his official dick chopping ceremony, he'd leave him alone. At night when his parents thought he was asleep, he snuck out and wandered a while. He pretended his decision was at random, but his feet were already taking him to the Kaspbrak house and his hand was already knocking at Eddie's window before he even admitted he wanted to be there.

"What are you doing here?" Eddie asked, but Richie thought maybe he could see, even in the dark, that Richie was in pretty bad shape, and he let him climb in through the window anyway.

He was crying even before Eddie went to his bedroom door and shut it, and stood there shivering with his arms wrapped around himself, feeling like an idiot but not caring because Bill – *Bill* –

"Jesus, all right," Eddie said, guiding him to the bed. He sat down on it and felt himself crumpling like a piece of paper into a shaking ball on the bed. His hands dug into the blankets and when Eddie handed him a pillow, he cried into it in total silence, as unable to breathe or make noise as if someone had kicked him in the stomach. Eddie rubbed his shoulder and whispered *okay, okay*, but eventually gave up and rested his head on the side of Richie's arm in a weird sort of hug.

"Bill punched me," he choked out when he could speak again. It didn't convey the fullness of his horror: that Bill, his best friend, the one person in the world who had never made him feel like he was

annoying or unwanted even when he was being annoying and any sane person wouldn't want him around, Bill whom he loved with a greater intensity than a brother because you *had* to love a sibling, *Bill* had looked at him like he hated him.

"Sometimes I want to punch you," Eddie said.

Richie rolled over and rested his head on Eddie's leg, and in a moment Eddie's fingers began to stroke his hair. It was the first time anybody had touched him like that, with a tenderness that didn't come from a parent or a nurse, and it felt so good he thought quite seriously about never leaving the bed. "I know," he said. "I'm pretty punchable."

Eddie made a little tscking noise. "No you're not, not really. You're an asshole but you don't deserve that."

"I told him Georgie was dead," he blurted out, and bit his lip because he really thought he might start bawling again, and if he did he swore he was going to punch himself in the face.

"Oh," Eddie said. "I mean, I know, but that was probably bad."

"Yeah." It was something the two of them, and he and Mike especially, had talked about a lot. *He knows and that's why he can't accept it*, Mike said. *What will it take to make him accept it?* Eddie asked him. *He'd have to see him, I think*, Mike said, and that night Richie dreamed about seeing Georgie again, deep in the sewers.

"He's probably sorry he did it."

"I doubt it." Richie wiped his face on Eddie's pajama bottoms. "Don't tell him I was upset, okay?"

"I won't tell anyone," Eddie said. "You can stay the night if you want. My mom's new tranquilizers make her sleep like fifteen hours in a row."

"That's all right," he said. Another day he might have risked it, but the look on Mrs. Kaspbrak's face when she took Eddie to the hospital was still on his mind. All the adults in Derry had that look lately – like if Richie turned his head for a second, when he looked back he

would see the clown.

Since that night there had been something different and he'd ignored it for nearly the same reason, afraid that if he looked away and turned back again it would become something else, that Eddie would become something else to him. And he had, but Richie thought this was a change he could probably deal with, especially if it meant Eddie wanted to kiss him.

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Eddie did not want to kiss him.

"Just forget about it," he hissed the next day at the arcade. He kept looking around like there was anyone there who could hear them, although the place was empty.

"Why?" he asked. "It was nice. I like you."

"Don't say shit like that." Eddie put his hand over his eyes like Richie was giving him a migraine.

"Why not? I like you," Richie said, turning away from his game and letting Birdie kick his ass. "And you like me. You kissed me."

"God, shut *up*," Eddie said frantically. "The others will be here any second."

"And?" He turned back to the game and defeated Birdie at the last possible moment, but he had to be honest, it didn't even feel good.

"And I just don't want anybody to know," Eddie said.

"Fine," Richie said. "But I think you're being stupid and I want that on the record."

"It's on the record, whatever," Eddie said, and then Ben showed up. One of the best things about Ben was his willingness to be player 2 and let himself be annihilated repeatedly, so Richie decided to ignore Eddie for the rest of the day. In the afternoon the ice cream truck came around and Richie always got a Fun Dip for himself and Eddie to share, but decided to get a Firecracker instead. Eddie's face turned

thunderous when he returned from the ice cream truck with only one popsicle.

"This is why," he said, his voice cracking, when Ben was in the bathroom. "You can't just be normal."

"We could be like normal," he said, letting the popsicle drip all down his wrist before he licked it up. "We could be the same as always *but also kissing*."

"Oh my god," Eddie said, throwing his hands in the air. "Oh my god."

"Beep-beep, Richie," Ben said from behind him.

That night at the dinner table, he chewed his green beans the requisite three times before he declared that he hated them and wanted to spit them out, and after his mother said no and he said yes and his mother said no another four or five times, he finally asked, "Okay, how do you know if somebody likes you?"

"Are we speaking in hypotheticals, or is there an actual somebody?" his father asked, setting down his book.

"Hypotheticals," he said. "How did you know mom liked you?"

"She hit me over the head with a bat and dragged me back to her cave," his father said.

"Went," his mother said, but she gave him a little sidelong smile from behind her book that told Richie she didn't actually mind very much.

"Did she ever seem like she liked you but said she didn't?" Richie asked.

"I'm not entirely sure she likes me even now." His father picked up his book again. "If you've made yourself clear and she says she's not interested, take her at her word and leave her alone."

"Ugh," Richie said, and slumped until he slid under the table and his mother nudged him with her foot and told him to finish his dinner.

He biked over to Eddie's after dinner, heedless of the curfew still in

effect, and didn't even have to knock on his window because it and the curtains were open.

"I thought you'd come by," Eddie said as he crawled into the room and sat in the chair at Eddie's desk.

"I just wanted to tell you that my dad said I should leave you alone and I agree," he said.

"You told your *dad*?" Eddie asked, flopping down on the bed like the strength had gone out of his legs. He had a long scratch across one knee and Richie wondered where he had gotten it.

Richie flapped his hand. "He thinks you're a hypothetical girl," he said, ignoring Eddie's outraged squeak. "The point is, I'm not going to bother you about it anymore. You obviously don't like me and I don't want to be a dickhead."

"Thank you," Eddie said in a small voice.

"Did you like kissing me, though? It seemed like you did, but maybe you were just temporarily overwhelmed by the, like, the enormous size of my—"

"I did," Eddie said. "I liked it. I just don't want to do it again."

"Oh," Richie said.

"Don't you ever feel like that?"

He stared at the ceiling for a second, considering. "No," he said. "Things are awesome or not awesome. If they're awesome I always want to do them. If they're not awesome, like your mom, I don't really want to do them again."

"You really liked it that much?" Eddie asked. "You like me that much?"

Richie felt himself smiling without even meaning to, putting his arms on the back of the chair and resting his chin on them. "*Yeah*," he said. "I told you."

“I thought you were messing with me,” Eddie said.

“I am never anything but one hundred percent fucking genuine,” Richie said. He had more to say, but Eddie stopped him short by standing up and walking over to the chair Richie was sitting in, looking down at him gravely.

“Take your glasses off,” he said. “You almost gave me a black eye last time.”

Richie tossed his glasses into the unknown before the words were fully out of Eddie’s mouth. Eddie’s blurry face loomed above him before he was suddenly close enough to see clearly again and then Richie didn’t care at all. He had thought so much about kissing Eddie again that he almost felt like he’d taught himself how to do it better somehow – he had imagined kissing this way, biting his lip a little, or that way, slow and warm, and god, wouldn’t it be nice if he could pull Eddie into his lap? He tugged him close and Eddie, as if he had read his mind, climbed awkwardly onto him, the nylon of his shorts rubbing against Richie’s legs.

The chair creaked a little when Richie put both arms around him and pulled him even closer, kissing down the side of his neck. Eddie relaxed against him for a second, sighing in pleasure, and then pushed himself up and off Richie fast, turning away from him and wiping his mouth.

“I don’t want to do this,” he said, his voice trembling. “I didn’t want to, and then you came here and you made me do it anyway.”

Richie shot to his feet, sticking his hands in his hair and stalking around Eddie’s room so he wouldn’t throw something. He found his glasses on the floor beside the lamp and put them on. “*You kissed me. Both times.*”

Eddie stood with his arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed. “Please just go away,” he whispered.

Richie gave a strangled scream and left, kicking Eddie’s chair on the way out. He popped his head inside the window frame one more time to add, “Fuck you,” before he rode off furiously into the night.

For three days he refused to hang out with any of them. Bill called every day and he didn't call back because honestly it was Bill's fault anyway, when it came down to it. Stan was in Vermont visiting cousins ("They're like us but without actually being interesting," Stan told him glumly before he left. "They have arguments about different kinds of Solitaire."), and Mike had to work. Ben liked to let people be unless they came to him, which Richie normally did. He didn't know what Bev was up to until the third day, when she showed up at his door.

"I'm leaving this weekend, asshole," she said. "I wanted to say goodbye to you, but you keep not showing up."

She had cigarettes, of course, and the two of them went down to the section of the Kenduskeag that passed through the Barrens to smoke – not near the drain, though. Richie had had just about enough of the fucking drains in Derry.

"What's your problem lately, anyway?" Bev asked after they had sat a while in silence. "Bill said you won't talk to him."

"He did punch me in the face," Richie said.

"I thought you guys had cleared that up," she said. "With the whole _"

She waved her hands in circles in the direction of the sewers.

"Yeah," he said. "We're better. But."

He didn't know how to say that he wasn't sure he could ever trust Bill again. It sounded stupid to say it like that, like Bill was a husband who had had an affair or something, but trust was the right word – he could never take back the fact that he had hit him. Richie didn't know what could ever make up for it; he only knew that the perfect accord that had existed before was broken. Of course he had done his part in breaking it, but he had only told the truth. Moreover, it was a truth he had wanted to tell the entire year, staring in disbelief while everybody else allowed Bill to burrow deeper into his theory that

Georgie was still alive. They were all too cowardly to just fucking say it, and he was furious at them all even as he knew it was just as shitty to go along with it as it was to tear away the veneer Bill had built around himself.

“We’re fine,” he said.

“I think you will be,” she said, ashing into the water. She tapped her bare feet on a rock just under the surface, splashing them both. The cold water was nice and the sun that dried it on his legs was nice and the cigarette was nice, and he sat for a moment not thinking about anything else.

“Eddie kissed me,” he said. “Twice.”

Her eyebrows flew up and she stared into the water, wide-eyed. “Shit,” she said. Then, a few moments later, “Did you want him to kiss you?”

He nodded, and opened his mouth to expand on the topic of Eddie and kissing and kissing Eddie, and being forbidden to kiss Eddie, but she stopped him.

“Wait. Eddie?” she said. “Eddie. He kissed you.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Why, is that so unbelievable?”

She put the tip of her cigarette in the water and then set it beside her. “Well, yeah, kind of. He never seemed like he liked – anyone, I guess.”

“I don’t think he does like me,” Richie said. “He kisses me and then he tells me to go away and says he never wants to do it again.”

“It must be hard for him,” Bev said.

“Hard for *him*?” Richie said. “Bev, I really love you, but you don’t understand a fucking thing about blue balls.”

“Oh please,” she said. “And you haven’t even thought that he might have some trouble with, you know, being gay?”

Richie stared.

“Jesus Christ, Richie,” she said.

“Gay,” he said. “He’s not – do you think he is?”

“At least a little, probably, if he wants to kiss you,” she said.

“Even if he likes girls?” he asked. “Because I think he does. And I do. So what’s that? That’s not gay, is it?”

“I think people can like girls and boys,” she said dubiously.

“It doesn’t even matter,” he said. “I like him and I’m not freaking out.”

“It’s nice that you’re not freaking out, but not everybody is like you.” Bev pulled out another cigarette. “Eddie isn’t. He freaks out about a lot of things.”

“You’re fucking right about that.” He tapped her arm and she gave him another cigarette, lighting it with her cherry. They were silent again for a while.

“I don’t want to leave you guys,” she said. “But I can’t wait to leave Derry.”

“You should run away from here as fast as you can,” he said. “All of us should, and never come back.”

“We all will,” she said. “No more Derry, no more Maine.”

He caught the barest hint of movement out of the corner of his eye, and for a second his fear was so great he almost choked on it. He clutched Bev’s arm, and they both froze.

“It’s just a turtle,” she said, patting his hand, and he realized she was right. Just a turtle, slowly plodding through the grass.

“Someday I won’t react to perfectly fucking normal situations like I’m going to have to shiv someone,” he said.

“Shiv,” she said, giggling. “You’re such a badass, Richie.”

“You and me,” he said. “Warriors. The rest of them would be long gone if not for us.”

She got up without warning and, scooping water into the cup of her hands, got him full in the face with it, cigarette and all.

“Fucking metal,” he said, and they splashed each other until they were drenched and Richie did not think about Eddie’s voice in his ear explaining all the ways in which brain parasites could go up your nose at all.

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Mike didn’t have to work on the farm the next day, so they all met in the park and argued about what to do for a while until Ben, whose mother wanted to take him school shopping, had to leave. Eventually they drifted toward Richie’s house to watch the tapes he had made of the Simpsons, which nobody else was allowed to watch at home. It occurred to him as they biked that since they had cut their hands – the remnants of which were almost healed over – the seven of them hadn’t all been in one place together again, and after this weekend they never would be.

“I l-love coming over to Richie’s h-h-h-house,” Bill said when they raided the pantry for snacks. “His m-m-mom lets him e-eat anything.”

“Isn’t your dad a dentist?” Mike asked, looking at a box of Pop-Tarts.

“He says cavities are a combination of genetics and dental hygiene, and I have great dental hygiene and okay genetics,” Richie said. “I’m just not allowed to have soda.”

“It will rot your insides anyway,” Eddie said. It was the first thing he’d said to Richie the entire day, although he had looked at him intently a few times.

“And Fruit Roll-ups won’t?” Bev asked, delicately pulling one apart to pick out the shapes.

“It’s a different kind of rot,” Eddie protested, and tried to explain

until everyone shushed him when the show started.

They managed to fit three on the couch and two sitting in front of the couch so they could all reach the food on the coffee table, and although Richie told himself that he was going to sit far away from Eddie, he didn't. He sat on the floor directly in front of him and for three seconds he felt very mature and reasonable because he had made the first move toward bridging the awkwardness between them. Then he settled back against the couch and felt Eddie shift around behind him and had to admit that it had nothing to do with bridging awkwardness and that he really just wanted to be near Eddie, even if it was just for a few hours of watching a stupid TV show.

Gradually, as the first episode bled into the second, Eddie unfolded and stretched his legs out, nudging against Richie's shoulder. He moved, but Eddie said, "No, you're okay," and his heart started to pound too hard. He couldn't concentrate on the Simpsons at all, which he supposed was all right because it was his favorite show in the world and he had seen every episode so far at least ten times. His sole focus was Eddie's leg next to his shoulder. He could, if he wanted to – and he did – lean to the right and rest his head right there. He'd been there before; it was a comfortable place and there was an outside chance Eddie might remember the last time and pet his hair.

Halfway through the second episode he went for it, because he couldn't stand not to. If there was an opportunity to go for it, whatever it was, Richie knew he would probably always take it. Eddie might push him away, but even aside from the kissing Richie knew they liked to touch each other and that Eddie found reasons to do it. Before the kissing Richie hadn't thought of it as romantic, although he knew now that that was stupid. Of course it was romantic. Eddie's touch was warm and satisfying and it made his scalp tingle, and it wasn't like anybody else's touch at all; it felt better than pretty much anything, and if that wasn't romantic, Richie had not spent far too much fucking time reading his mother's romance novels on the sly trying to find the sex scenes.

Eddie didn't push him away, and after a little while his fingers wound up in Richie's hair, stroking gently, giving him goosebumps, making him heavy and content like he was exactly where he was supposed to be. Richie closed his eyes.

"Time to wake up, enchanted princess," Bev said. The tape had played to the end and the screen was fuzzy, and when Richie lifted his head he realized everybody was getting up to go. It was almost dusk outside, he realized, and felt a horrible pang of loss that he couldn't understand. Fall, which had been far away even yesterday, was laid out before him in the chilly brisk air, and then high school, and change, and what he loved was right here, right now. It was as if he were already many years older looking back on this moment with pain, knowing that everything that came afterward was different.

"You're leaving tomorrow," he said.

"Early, yeah," she said, and gave him a tight-lipped smile. It was a smile that said Bev Marsh was going to be just fine, thank you very fucking much. He wanted to hug her and so he did, scrambling to his feet and holding onto her tighter than she probably would have liked. The others wrapped around her, winding their arms through and around each other, and held on until Richie's mother entered the den. Richie guessed she must have come home from work sometime while they were watching television and decided to leave them alone, but he still felt as if he'd woken into another world somehow.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, which they all seemed to understand was grown-up code for *I don't understand what you're doing so please stop it*.

"Beverly's l-leaving for P-p-p-portland tomorrow, Mrs. T-tozier," Bill said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart," she said. Richie wondered how much she knew; she wasn't exactly a PTA mom, but she knew other parents in the neighborhood, and he'd bet anything that the Marsh girl and her father were a hot topic that summer.

"Thank you, but I'll be all right," Bev said.

They dispersed after that, shaking their heads over offers of rides home, except for Eddie. He was still on the couch after the door had closed behind Bill, and Richie's mother asked if he was staying for dinner.

“Um, maybe,” he said, his eyes on Richie. “I have to call my mom and ask.”

Richie made a face and jerked his head toward his bedroom, and as soon as they were alone and he had shut the door behind him, Eddie went to his desk and started looking at his pile of old *Mad* magazines.

“Well?” Richie asked. “Are you staying for dinner?”

“I wanted to,” Eddie began. “Wait. Did you get a hamster?”

“No. Why?”

“It smells like cedar shavings in here.” Eddie looked around. “I honest to god think you got a hamster and didn’t even realize it. Nobody would ever know.”

“Fuck you. My room is exactly the way I like it,” he said testily. “Are you staying or not?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie said, taking a deep breath. “I like you.”

Richie shrugged and tried, with some success, to look casual. “Yeah, so?”

“What do you mean, yeah, so?” Eddie asked. “That was really fucking hard for me to say.”

“*Yeah, so*, are you going to tell me to go away again in five minutes?” Richie moved another stack of magazines from his bed to the floor so he could lounge there. “And by the way, why is it so hard for you to say you like me? I’m a fucking catch.”

Eddie tapped his knuckles on the desk, his mouth all screwed up for a second before he looked at the ceiling. “I don’t want to like boys,” he said.

“Why not?” Richie shrugged again. “I like you. It’s nice.”

“It’s not just easy like that,” Eddie said. “How can it be easy like that?”

His voice was shaking, and Richie abandoned his very casual pose to get up and lead Eddie to the bed instead. "Come on," he said, putting a hand on Eddie's chest to help him slow his breathing. "It is easy. We like each other, it feels nice, who gives a fuck about anything else?"

"You don't worry about – oh, I don't know, that there's something wrong with you? That you're going to hell? That your parents will find out about you, or the other kids, and everybody will hate you and want you to die?" Eddie's chest was starting to heave up and down again and Richie rubbed circles over his heart.

"I guess – no, I don't think about that stuff," he said. "I can see why you were worried. People are shitty."

"Yeah," Eddie said. Slowly, second by second, his breath calmed again. "I like you. I don't want to stop liking you. But I already have enough problems."

"I'm a good problem to have," Richie said, to make him smile and because it was true. "Look, there's nothing wrong with you and you're not going to hell, so you can cross those off."

"I know you're right," he said. "It's what I keep telling myself. There are lots of gay people in the world, right?"

"Yeah," Richie said. "Just not in Maine. You and I may be the only ones."

"I'm right about the other people though," Eddie said. "You know I am."

Richie stared at his hand on Eddie's chest, rubbing back and forth, for a minute or so. "After what we did this summer," he said softly, and stopped. It was hard for him to say aloud some of the concepts that ran deep in him, even though he knew Eddie would understand them. It wasn't a lack of understanding that worried him but the fear that Eddie would know that there was another part of him that wasn't there on the surface, and that that part of him was never certain or in control. That he wasn't funny at all, really, underneath. That he was someone else, his real self, there. "After that," he continued, "I don't

think I'm afraid anymore. I think I know what to do."

"I'm always afraid," Eddie whispered. "How do you make that stop?"

An image floated to the top of his consciousness and then drifted away again, leaving him puzzled – the turtle at the Barrens, moving through the grass.

"It just goes away," he said. "Because we fucking killed It, and nobody else could have done it but us."

"We're not invincible," Eddie said.

"Speak for yourself," Richie said. "I'm going to live forever and be super fucking rich and you can just, like, ride my coattails or whatever. I'll take you all to Hollywood with me. But that's not what I mean – I mean we did that so what is the point of being afraid to do anything ever again? Don't you think we've earned it?"

"I don't think people earn that," Eddie said. "I think you just are that kind of person or you aren't, and I'm not."

"Eddie, my love, my darling, my flower bud," Richie said, taking Eddie's face in his hands and smushing his cheeks. "I will teach you how to be that kind of person."

"You've been trying to do that the entire time we've known each other," Eddie mumbled around Richie's hands.

"Yeah, but now I have stronger methods of persuasion."

Eddie turned a little pink around the ears and neck. "I do like kissing you," he admitted.

"I know you do," Richie said. "Now all you have to do is stay for dinner and then stay the night and you can kiss me as much as you want. Boom. I've solved all your problems. Winner winner fucking chicken dinner."

Eddie pulled one of Richie's hands away from his face and looked at the palm. "Almost healed," he murmured before he kissed it, and then looked up at Richie as if daring him to laugh. "I'll stay for

dinner, and I'll stay the night, and I'll kiss you. But I don't want to tell anybody."

"Um," he said.

"Oh my god," Eddie said.

"It was just Bev."

"Oh, that's fine. But nobody else."

Richie considered. No Bill, no Mike, no Stan or Ben. "Forever?"

"No, just...until I'm not afraid of them hating me," Eddie said. "I guess I don't give a shit about anybody else except my mom."

"Okay," he said. "But what if they guess?"

"*Richie.*"

"All right, fine, *god*," he said, and stood up. "Come on, let's go eat. I'm fucking starving."

He led Eddie out of the room by his good hand, but before he opened the door, Eddie stopped.

"We're going to get out of Derry, right? We're getting the fuck out?"

"And never coming back," Richie said. "We're blowing this popsicle stand."

"I'm serious," Eddie said.

"Eds, I'm serious as a fucking heart attack," Richie said. "Now can we fucking eat so I can make out with you and not faint from starvation?"

"You know nothing about how the body works, like, at all," Eddie said.

Richie opened the door and pulled Eddie through it, and thought for a moment, *I should tell him about the turtle*, and then, without any reason, *but he already knows*. He had forgotten it by the time they had

reached the dinner table.